

Harlem Renaissance: A Resonance of Black Identity and Talent

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Abstract

Harlem renaissance was a literary cultural movement that developed during the early twentieth century in the American continent oblivious of the effect that it would and had created on the American spirit. It is interesting, that critics and historians often delimit this revolution to certain events that took place during its initial phase but in reality, the revolution had started when the African American community decided not to act as a second fiddle to the White Americans. The atrocities had heightened and it was unbearable to stand this injustice that was drafted behind the closed doors of legislatures and judiciary to uphold the policy of 'separate but equal.' This research paper evaluates the history of Harlem renaissance and its primary players that were the African American literati, political activists and artists and judges as to why this renaissance never achieved the recognition that it deserved.

Keywords: Renaissance, Black identity, Equality, Discrimination, Negro.

Introduction

It is true what famous American anthropologist Margaret Mead had said about the potential of the citizens of any country. She was clear that educated, thoughtful and committed citizens irrespective of their quantity had the potential to change the world and this doctrine stands true for the African American community in America. The first African slaves that came to America were just eleven which in present state have mounted to approximately forty million in recent demographic reports. But why were the African slaves brought to the American continent and how did the African American community come into being, needs speculation.

It was during the sixteenth and seventeenth century that imperialistic and colonial powers were creating their areas and colonies in different continents. Trade relations with the Asian continent were fruitful for the European powers but travelling was tedious and perilous. This instigated them to employ voyagers in search of new trade routes and colonies which would yield them resources and labour. One such voyager was Columbus who in hope of India, accidentally discovered the southern coast of America. He is one of the most revered and recognized traveller but he was also responsible for some of the most heinous and inhuman acts on the Natives. Without a shadow of doubt, it is easier to perceive that gaining power over the weaker section is a human tendency and a folly. Whatever maybe the case but this folly is hazardous and makes the society devoid of humanity and sympathy, the feelings of compassion and endurance for the other human beings.

As stated earlier, Columbus tried to prove his point that coloured people existed and thrived in the discovered land, he took some natives along with him. Though it is true that several countries like Portugal, Dutch were conducting slave trade across many countries but it was not a legalized trade with a proper setup. With increase in imperialistic prowess, countries like Britain, Spain, Germany entered in the slave trade setup and it was politically and religiously legalized. The natives of African continent were from the beginning being used as indentured labourers by different colonial powers. They were paid labourers and were humanly treated until the evil of selfish profiteering lurked in the minds of their owners. African villages were raided and plundered during the night and mercilessly captured Africans which were shipped to different countries. This new form of slavery was Chattel slavery and this new concept was beyond remedy. Slowly and gradually, these countries with the expansionist ventures created colonies and were in want of labourers in the 'New World,' primarily for agriculture and plantations in the Southern States of America which thrived due to its

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fertility in comparison to the infertile Northern States where the industries flourished. To compensate the workforce these captured African slaves were sold by the slave traders to the plantation and land owners.

There are certain facts that we find in the accounts of black people. The earlier slaves were having a better life as they were not treated as badly as the later slaves and also had the option to buy their freedom and start their own living or buying property and settle. But this reliability of freedom was a liability for the colonists as the slave freedom was incurring them monetary and man power loss. This inclined them to create harsher laws and rules which would curtail the life of the slaves into their hands. The chattel slavery bonded them for the lifetime and later it was made hereditary. The chance of an honourable and respectable life was denied to them. The living conditions were made miserable and long working hours were inhuman. The labourers were classified according to their strength of bearing the burden of the work. Some would die during travel, some in the early phase, some after few months and some after a year or so. Slavery in that era has been the main hindering factor in the growth of Africa, as its main working power was exhausting itself to make their owners and colonist prosperous. Till now, Africa has not recovered from this loss and still remains to be a third world country.

Another fact is that the African slaves that were brought to the American soil were totally cut off from their motherland and their African culture and traditions was gradually eroded and wiped from their mind but somewhere a fragmentary African part was left in their subconscious mind which they genetically passed to their coming generations. Robert Parks in the year 1919 had described about that conditions of the African slaves. According to him when these slaves came to America, they left everything that they owned in their motherland and the things that they brought with them was their dark complexion and tropical physique. He further described that, "Coming from all parts of Africa and having no common language and common tradition, the memories of Africa which they brought with them were soon lost. This inability to transmit and perpetuate African culture on American soil made the Negro unique among the peoples of the United States." (loc 168). Keeping this history in mind, it is compelling to peep into the history of African Americans and evolution of Harlem renaissance.

History of African Americans and their Association to the Harlem Renaissance

It is understood with the previous discussion that the Southern and Northern outlook towards the necessity of the institution of slavery was different. Due the excessive labour-oriented economy, the institution of slavery was legalized and popularized in the Southern States while the Northern States had a softer conduct in this regard and slavery was inhuman in their view. With the rise of intellectuals both in the field of politics and bureaucracy, slavery and colonialism became a triggered topic. Wealth and resource drain was clearly visible and the rise in taxes by the colonial powers infuriated the Northern populace. These awakened political leaders tried to convince the masses about the harmful effects of colonialism and gained support to fight against it but the Southern States were least interested in seeking freedom from imperialism. The imperialistic forces always accepted their demands and provided them free hand to dismiss and permit laws according to their whims. They were profiting from the colonial rule and hence, supported it. The Northern states were not in a condition to fight double wars. One with the colonial rule and second with the southern part. To convince the southern side, the northern side accepted those terms that diseased the American soil forever.

After the American revolution, both the parts drafted the constitution but it is often considered to be exclusively made for the white Americans because African slaves and their descendants were not considered to be a part of the country. In fact, they were not even considered as humans but commodity of slave owners. But it so happened that internationally slavery was banned and along with abolition of slavery Emancipation Proclamation was introduced in America which made every person on the American soil its rightful citizen. This also meant that the Africans and their descendants the African American community was now an equal American citizen. This became the primary source of conflict between the blacks and the whites in America.

By this time the African Americans were reviving from the lulling effects of inferiority and discrimination that was instilled in them since their birth. The best description can be found in the book *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, in which he writes about how the blacks were taught in America and what they are made to believe about themselves. He wrote that,

"You are born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to set forever. You were born into a

society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity." (7)

It is absolutely true that the African Americans were defined in their specific roles. They were not supposed to excel, to dream, to be ambitious rather it was expected from them to remain under the white supremacy and silently bear the atrocities. The blacks started to participate in the political forum and this gave rise to black leaders like Fredrick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. After the Proclamation, the enactment of Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments the African Americans became the American citizens and liable for equal rights. But the long psychological history of considering the blacks as inferior and slaves made it difficult to treat them equally. There were various solutions that were discovered to remediate this problem. One such absurd idea was to resettle the whole black population in Panama and it was the brainchild of Abraham Lincoln. But it was neither viable nor sensible. The primary solution to the negro problem was 'acceptance.' The white Americans must accept their black brothers as their own because they were in all its sense an American citizen.

But due to the mistakes committed in the past and the narrow-mindedness of politicians complicated the situation. In some way or the other, knowingly or unknowingly, the Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court facilitated for the ethnic cleansing. There are many judicial cases that demonstrated that the Constitution was misinterpreted and laws were twisted according to the situation to worsen the black situation in America. These free hands also allowed sanctioning of 'Jim Crow Laws' and the 'Black Codes' which led to the Great Migration of the blacks during the late nineteenth century. The mass exodus of blacks from the South to North was in hope that they would be accepted as equal but the Northern States followed a different sort of discrimination, i.e., economic discrimination based on colour and gender discrimination. In the Southern States, the blacks were discriminated for the race, colour, gender, religion and sexes. Although the type of discrimination differed but it was bestowed on the blacks only. Many psychological critics have labelled that the white supremacy suffered from 'Afrophobia' which resulted in the deplorable condition of the African Americans.

The above-mentioned black leaders had their own ideologies for the upliftment of the black community and they formed various organizations for this cause like NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People), UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) or the Tuskegee Institute. Their political agendas were very clear but they were unable to gather momentum or mass association and they sorted the remedy in art and literature. To popularize their ideas, they started their journals and newspapers. They sponsored and became patrons of different events. It is often considered that the pen is mightier than the sword and the same happened with the Harlem renaissance. Two important magazines that brought this revolution were the *Crisis* and the *Opportunity*. The primary function of these magazines was to discover new black talent and through this talent revive the spirit of Negro identity. These journals gave talents like Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Richard Wright etc., whereas artist like Aaron Douglas, Josephine Baker, Augusta Savage became global names. Interestingly, all these literary artistic activities culminated in the small black suburb in New York, named Harlem and from here the Harlem renaissance took its name.

There are various events that are associated to mark its beginning and end but it needs to be understood that Harlem renaissance was more than just a cultural literary renaissance, it was a mindset and an ideology. It was not about black capabilities but about their identity and inheritance. It was about their race and how they would be recognized in their motherland America. But it is unfortunate that even after so much impetus this is one of the most unrecognized and over-shadowed movements in American history. There are many reasons for its denial. Though the African Americans were fighting for their rights since the abolition of slavery but the actual recognition they attained was after the mistreatment of the black soldiers in the First World War. They showcased their patriotism and loyalty in the war but back home, they received lynchings and homicide at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan who made them understand that they should not hope for good in return of their nationalism. Another factor was the Great Depression, that economically shattered the finances of the publication houses, the patrons, sponsors who found other means of investments rather than on the poverty-stricken black literati and artists. Second World War and natural disasters in the Southern States like flooding in Mississippi also devalued the renaissance and very soon it was replaced by the Civil Rights Movement

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which contained the ideology of black identity but the means of attaining it was purely political. We can also assume that because it was a non-violent movement and fought with heart-wrenching words it did not gain popularity but we cannot deny its relevance. It awakened the sleeping souls of blacks and filled it with racial pride and dignity which was long lost in the myriad of white supremacy and negligence to black freedom. Hence, it has high esteem in the African Americans' lives.

Conclusion

It can be the most invisible renaissance but it is definitely the most relevant and logical renaissance on the American soil and it showcased the importance of written and spoken words. The black authors and artists considered it as their duty to revive and rekindle the proud black identity that they were bestowed with. This renaissance was overpowered by events of national and international importance and it itself was culminated into the Civil Rights Movement in 1955 but it never eroded for the history of American literature and art. Its effects are still felt in the uniqueness of the Americanism and their fight for identity was relevant in the past and in the present as well. Although, they have attained the rightful American citizenship and political rights but we still find cases of discrimination and violence against the black community. Hence, their fight for their bonafide identity still continues.

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